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Neal White wins 2003 Making a Difference National Volunteer Award

By **Jeff Alexander** staff writer
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In Neal White's mind, the national award he received wasn't for him, but for the Jupiter High School Environmental Research and Field Studies Academy.

When he talks about the plaque he received last week from the Bureau of Land Management for its 2003 Making A Difference National Volunteer Award, he focuses on the student involvement.

"The sheer number of hours our students put in has been awesome," he said Monday after returning from a three-day, all-expense paid trip to Washington, D.C., to receive the award. "I think we have three times more volunteers than they have employees."

White, along with eight other recipients from around the country, were feted in a ceremony at the U.S. Department of the Interior's South Penthouse and Roof Terrace last Thursday.

"It was great, they took really good care of us," White said of the three days.

Standing atop the terrace of the South Penthouse enabled White and others to get a night-time bird's-eye view of Washington.

And, on Friday, they were able to walk by the White House, the first time since 9/11 that Pennsylvania Avenue was re-opened to foot traffic.

But the ceremony itself was most memorable to White, he said. Listening to other volunteers speak of the work they've done for the Bureau of Land Management "really hit home" about the dedication of the students and staff in the 10-year-old magnet program at Jupiter High School, he said.

"We were really the only one east of the Mississippi to receive the award," White said. "We were one of nine, out of a total of 30,000 nominees. It really didn't hit me until I got to Washington."

White's award came because of the work he and the Environmental Research and Field Studies Academy have done for seven years on the 80-acre public lands at U.S. 1 and State Road 707, said Faye Winters, field office biologist, who nominated him for the award.

Over the years, students have aided in removing exotic species, restoring native plants on undisturbed land, all under White's

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supervision and leadership, she said.

"He is an extraordinarily generous person," Winters said. "He's been donating his time, not only in the high school, but with Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. He works so hard."

The last Saturday of September, the bureau sponsors a National Public Lands Day where most of the volunteers are Jupiter High School students, Winters said.

White said that he and students do some removal or planting an average of once a month, maybe even more often.

The land, which includes Lighthouse Park, also is on the south side of State Road 707, but more of that land is disturbed than on the north side, White said. "It's difficult to bring that back to the natural state," he said.

A teacher for nearly 25 years, White started with Jupiter High School, the school from which he graduated in 1974, as an environmental sciences teacher in 1990. He helped establish the magnet program, offering four years with concentrations in environmental sciences, three years later. He coordinates it with Phil Weinrich, the academy's lead teacher.

- jeff.alexander@scripps.com



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